



January 26, 2000

Mr. Thomas F. Keever
Assistant District Attorney
1450 East McKinney, Suite 3100
Denton, Texas 76202

OR2000-0254

Dear Mr. Keever:

You ask, on behalf of Denton County Judge Kirk Wilson (the “county judge”), whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under the Public Information Act, chapter 552 of the Government Code. This letter ruling addresses each of your decision requests to this office in which you do not raise exceptions to disclosure for particular documents, but rather only assert that the requested records held by the county judge are not subject to required public disclosure pursuant to section 552.003 of the Government Code and that the broad nature of the requests for information are not permitted by the Public Information Act. We have considered your arguments and those that were submitted on behalf of the requestor. The specific decision requests that this open records letter ruling addresses are listed at the bottom of this letter.

The county judge received a series of written requests for access to all memos, letters, reports, directives, e-mail, telephone message slips, or other writings, pertaining to twenty-one listed subjects, that were either produced or received by the county judge or his staff during a specified time interval. The same requestor submitted this same open records request to the county judge on a daily basis. *See generally* Attorney General Opinion JM-48 at 2 (1983) (governmental body not required to comply with standing request for information to be collected or prepared in future); Open Records Decision Nos. 452 at 3 (1986) (open records request applies only to information in existence at time request is received), 362 at 2 (1983) (governmental body not required to supply information not in its possession).

You first assert that the office of the county judge is not a governmental body, under section 552.003 of the Government Code, and instead is a judicial office that is excluded from the scope of the Public Information Act. You argue that the office of the county judge is not

subject to the Public Information Act (1) because it is not a “governmental body,” as defined by section 552.003(1)(A) of the Government Code, and (2) because it is a judicial office, and under the Act “‘governmental body’ . . . does not include the judiciary.” Gov’t Code § 552.003(1)(B). This office addressed substantially the same contention in Open Records Decision No. 204 (1978). There, a county judge had received a request for records relating to his correspondence with constituents and to reimbursement of his expenses by the county. He contended that he was a member of the judiciary and therefore was excluded from the scope of the former Open Records Act, article 6252-17a of Vernon’s Texas Civil Statutes. This office noted that, under the former Act, the definition of “governmental body” encompassed both “‘the commissioners court of each county’” and “‘the part, section, or portion of every organization, corporation, commission, committee, institution, or agency which is supported in whole or in part by public funds[.]’” ORD 204 at 1, *quoting* V.T.C.S. art. 6252-17a, § (2)(1)(B), (F). We also acknowledged that, under the Act, “‘the Judiciary [was] not included within [the definition of governmental body].’” *Id.*, *quoting* V.T.C.S. art. 6252-17a, § (2)(1)(G). We pointed out, however, that “[t]he county judge is judge of the county court, and also is presiding officer of the commissioners court,” *id.*, and as such “‘is not a judicial officer only.’” *Id.* at 2, *quoting* *Clark v. Finley*, 54 S.W. 343 (Tex. 1899). Based on these considerations, we concluded:

The commissioners court is expressly included in the definition of governmental body . . . and the county judge is a part of the commissioners court. . . . Section 2(1)(F) makes every part of an organization, institution or agency supported by public funds a governmental body and subject to the [Open Records] Act. Accordingly, we believe each component of the commissioners court, *including the county judge*, is subject to the Act.

We do not believe that there is an irreconcilable conflict within the definition of ‘governmental body’ as to its application to the county judge as part of the commissioners court, and its exclusion of the judiciary from the Act. *We believe that information held by the county judge is subject to the Open Records Act except to the extent it pertains to cases and proceedings before the county court.* This construction of the Act is consistent with both the requirement that it be liberally construed in favor of granting any request for information and the exclusion of the judiciary from the Act.

ORD 204 at 2 (emphasis added). Since the issuance of Open Records Decision No. 204, there has been no fundamental change in either the constitutional responsibilities of a county

judge or the operative language of the Public Information Act.¹ See Tex. Const. Art. V, §§ 15, 16, 17, 18; Gov't Code §§ 552.001, 552.003(1)(A)(ii), (x) and (B); see also *Benavides v. Lee*, 665 S.W.2d 151, 152 (Tex. App.--San Antonio 1983, no writ) ("The intent of the Open Records Act must not be circumvented by an unnecessarily broad reading of the judiciary exclusion").² Accordingly, we conclude that, to the extent that the requestor seeks information that does not pertain to cases and proceedings before the constitutional county court, the office of the County Judge of Denton County is subject to the requirements of chapter 552 of the Government Code.

You also contend that the Public Information Act does not require a governmental body to provide access to information requested on such a broad, generalized basis. Rather, citing section 552.222 of the Government Code as authority, you contend that the requestor should be required to narrow the scope of his request to specify the type of correspondence sought or the specific subject matter of the requested correspondence. You argue:

Numerous previous open records decisions rendered by your predecessors in office have held that a public information request may not be an overbroad, generalized inquiry but must instead identify the specific information or documents sought. [Citations omitted.] The decisions expressly recognize the excessive burden that would be placed on custodians of public records in responding to broad, generalized requests and have held that burden to be unreasonable while still recognizing the right of any requestor to seek specific public information under the Act.

It is well-established that a governmental body may not disregard a request for records made pursuant to the Public Information Act merely because a requestor does not specify the exact documents desired. A governmental body must make a good faith effort to relate a request to information held by it. Open Records Decision No. 561 at 8-9 (1990), 87 (1975). Section

¹The Public Information Act was codified as chapter 552 of the Government Code, and the former article 6252-17a of Vernon's Texas Civil Statutes was repealed, by the Seventy-third Legislature. The codification of the former Open Records Act was a non-substantive revision. See Act of May 4, 1993, 73rd Leg., R.S., ch. 268, § 47, 1993 Tex. Gen. Laws 583, 986.

²For other instances in which this office has construed the judiciary exception to the Public Information Act and its predecessor statute, see Open Records Decision Nos. 646 (1996) (notwithstanding involvement of district judges in its administration, community supervision and corrections department is governmental body and not part of judiciary); 572 (1990) (Bexar County Personal Bond Office is governmental body and not within judiciary exception); 527 (1989) (Court Reporters Certification Board; same). In *Benavides v. Lee*, the Court of Appeals held the Webb County Juvenile Board to be subject to the Open Records Act, even though the board members included members of the judiciary and the county judge. See *Benavides*, 665 S.W.2d at 151-52.

552.222(b) of the Government Code, however, provides that if a governmental body is unable to determine the nature of the records being sought, it may ask the requestor to clarify the request so that the desired records may be identified. This office has previously held that a request “must sufficiently identify the information requested and an agency may ask for a clarification if it cannot reasonably understand a particular request.” Open Records Decision Nos. 663 at 4 (1999), 23 at 1-2 (1974); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 304 (1982) (governmental body sought clarification as to particular documents sought when requestor asked for all documents relating to particular issue).

Similarly, section 552.222(b) also provides that “[i]f a large amount of information has been requested, the governmental body may discuss with the requestor how the scope of a request might be narrowed” However, section 552.222(b) does not stand for the proposition that a request may be denied merely because it seeks a broad range of documents. The purpose of this section is to authorize a dialogue between the governmental body and the requestor regarding the scope of the records request.³ ORD 663. When a requestor makes a vague or broad request, the governmental body should make a good faith effort to advise the requestor of the type of documents available so that the requestor may narrow or clarify the request. *See id.* at 5. On the other hand, if the requestor chooses not to narrow a broad request, the governmental body must release all responsive information if no exception to disclosure applies. Furthermore, and contrary to your assertions, the administrative inconvenience of providing public records is not grounds for refusing to comply with the Public Information Act. *Industrial Found. v. Texas Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 687 (Tex. 1976), *cert. denied*, 430 U.S. 931 (1977).

We have reviewed the open records requests submitted to the county judge. Each request specifies the physical or other form of the information, the subject matter of the information, and the time frame for the creation or receipt of the requested information. The requestor states that, with certain limitations, he wants access to each document produced or received by the county judge and his office regarding certain matters during the time interval specified in each request.⁴ The requests, while encompassing numerous facets of county business, are sufficiently clear and understandable to inform the county judge of the records being requested, as is evidenced by your ability to identify records responsive to each of the individual requests.

³Section 552.222(b) also limits the nature of the inquiries by the governmental body to those regarding the requested documents themselves. This section prohibits the governmental body from inquiring into the purpose for which the requestor seeks the records.

⁴The requestor has excluded from the scope of his request “mass mailings or pre-printed materials intended for wide distribution . . . [and] personal e-mails between co-workers not concerning the transaction of official Denton County business.”

You have previously contended that “a balancing of the interests of the general public to access to public information and its right to economic, efficient government dictates that generalized ‘fishing expeditions’ for information not be permitted” under the Public Information Act. Although section 552.001(a) of the Government Code expresses the fundamental precept that “each person is entitled, unless otherwise expressly provided by law, at all times to complete information about the affairs of government and the official acts of public officials and employees,” the Texas Legislature has recognized that an individual’s right to public information should not create an undue hardship on governmental bodies and accordingly has enacted adequate safeguards to ensure the economic and efficient functioning of governmental bodies when complying with the release provisions of the Public Information Act. *See, e.g.*, Gov’t Code §§ 552.231, .232, .261, .2615.

The Public Information Act provides a presumptive right of access to *complete* information about the affairs of government -- in this instance, the county judge’s office and employees. The requestor seeks to obtain this information on a daily basis through an open records request for all correspondence received or generated by the county judge’s office in connection with the transaction of official county business. Given the mandate found in section 552.001 that the provisions of the Public Information Act be liberally construed to effect this end, we conclude that the records requests are valid.⁵ Consequently, the county judge must release all documents for which you have raised no exception to disclosure.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov’t Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the

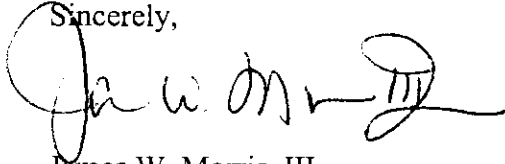
⁵Any questions you may have about copy charges generally should be directed to the General Services Commission. Gov’t Code §§ 552.261, .262.

statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at 877/673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James W. Morris, III', with a stylized flourish at the end.

James W. Morris, III
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JWM/RWP/ch

Ref.: ID# 131645, 131716, 131729, 131774, 131775, 131778, 131879, 131888
132135, 132286, 132364, 132402, 132471, 132530, 132644, 132660, 132724
132774, 132842, 132926, 132944

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